

#219 ERNEST GAULT: FORT WEAVER

John Martini (JM): Today is December 5, 1991. This is an oral history interview tape with Mr. Ernest Gault. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Gault was a Private assigned to the 97th [*Coast Artillery Regiment*] Anti-Aircraft at Fort Weaver. He was a Private in the Coast Artillery. He was twenty-three years old at the time. My name is John Martini. I'm with the National Park Service, and this tape is being produced in conjunction with the USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, and television station KHET-TV, in Honolulu. And Mr. Gault, thanks for coming.

Ernest Gault (EG): Glad to be here.

JM: How'd you get into the Army, and especially into the Coast Artillery?

EG: Well, I was drafted in March of '41, through Fort Dix, and there was a big group from New Jersey, and from New York that went down to Fort Eustace, as the coast artillery anti-aircraft contingent. I don't think we had any selection in that. It was time to get anti-aircraft. And we were there then from March, or April, 'til the early part of July, and finished their basic training. And then, we went to the West Coast, because they had three-inch gun batteries in Hawaii that we were able to be trained on for anti-aircraft.

JM: How did you take it when you got news that you were going to go all the way to Hawaii?

EG: Well, I took a AWOL over the fourth of July, and that's still on my record. (Chuckles) But I was back before they took off, because I was ready to go. And it took us seven days to get from Eustace to Fort Mason and we took the [*PRESIDENT*] *COOLIDGE* -- and there must have been 3,000 troops on the [*PRESIDENT*] *COOLIDGE* when we came over and landed. Right away, we were assigned to Fort Weaver. And that was fairly inaccessible, but we were compatible and got along great, so we didn't mind going across the harbor in order to get supplies at Fort Kamehameha.

JM: Now, Fort Weaver was a sub-post of Fort Kamehameha, right?

EG: I believe. The gut was never explained to me, but I think it was.

JM: Describe living condition out there at Fort Weaver at the time.

EG: Well, they put up perimetral tents and housed . . .

JM: Those are the circular ones?

EG: They're the circular canvas tents. And they housed us right in the sand for all the time we were there. It was maybe 160 officers and men in that battery G.

JM: Okay. What did the place consist of? I mean, how big was it? What kind of armament and artillery?

EG: Well, they had the sixteen-inch rifles that were under Fort Kamehameha's command. And they had this three-inch gun battery that we were assigned to, that was fixed but they were not in concrete. They were steel, movable. But we never moved them all the time we were there. And always knew our zero point

for shooting was to move the rifle, drop the breach and point her on Diamond Head's highest point. And then you got her there, you had zero.

JM: That was your bore sighting point?

EG: That was our bore sighting point. And we also had what they called was a height finder. And it was about seventeen feet of telescope out on the end. And they picked one of the guys that had that type of vision where he could size up -- I don't know what the word is -- but how high a plane was, and he got pretty good at it, 'cause we used to get some practice from the Navy running targets for us.

JM: So you did get practice?

EG: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

JM: Did you --- now you got there, it was late July or August, 1941?

EG: It would have been more toward the middle of July, I think.

JM: Were you . . .

EG: Maybe a little later than that.

JM: Were you aware of any heightened degree of training or alerts, or anything that was going on in the islands at this time. Was General Short really drilling you guys?

EG: Well, yeah, they would push on us. We'd get cold --- orders to drill in this sand, up to our ankles, on a regular basis. And then we did a lot of work at the three-inch gun battery, and our commanding officer was a second lieutenant, by the name of William G. Sylvester. And he was great. He was our range officer and they brought in cadre from the coast artillery. They brought in the sergeants and the corporals, and these fellows. I don't know what experience they had, but they seemed to know what they were doing.

JM: It was kind of remote out there at Fort Weaver, but you did get pass and liberty. Were you able to get into town?

EG: Oh yeah. You know, they were --- our PX was over at Fort Kamehameha, so they ran the dinghy that ran from the west side, or the east side of the harbor, over to the west side. And about maybe twice a day, why, they would run the dinghy. They didn't over-exercise it, but we would go over there on a pretty regular basis.

JM: Do you remember how you spent the night of December 6, 1941?

EG: I sure do. I know how I spent December 6 very well. I was down at the harbor watching the *ARIZONA* come in, watching the *WEST VIRGINIA* come in, and when those things come through that harbor, they look like giants. And we went back and thought, well, that's great. And we were on alert. As a matter of fact, our alert was never canceled.

JM: This would be the alert that happened just a few days before?

EG: Yeah, we were going for three weeks. The Navy was on the alert and we were on that, because of that, we were on alert and we were never put off alert, even though I -- when I saw the ships coming through the harbor, I was wondering why they were coming in (chuckles) and we weren't getting any word about going off the alert.

JM: Basically a good point. Was it ever explained clearly? Were you defending Fort Weaver, were you defending the island of Hawaii. Or you defending the ships?

EG: No, that was never clearly explained. We figured --- we were defending the harbor, basically. But in our battery where our guns were, we were not welcome. We called an algaroba forest.

JM: I think we call it today, keawe.

EG: I've heard it called it that, but we never used that word. And there were a lot of these trees around, you could see the sky beautifully but you could not see a ship in the harbor, even though it couldn't have been more than a mile and a half or two miles away.

And when we heard --- when we were still on alert, I was pulling the last shift of guard duty on the seventh. And I alerted my CP about 7:25, "There's something going on here. I think we're under attack"

And the CP came back and said, "You go back and look again."

JM: This would be 7:25 in the morning, on the . . .

EG: Yeah, that's what it always seemed like and my watch said 7:25.

JM: What specifically were you seeing that made you think there was an attack?

EG: Well, I saw a lot of planes coming over Pearl Harbor, and we were there long enough to know that no planes except Army, Navy and Marine ever flew close to that harbor. And the Pan-Am flying boat that used to come in, it never flew over the harbor. So that isn't what alerted me as much as I saw these bombs dropping, and I can't figure out, maybe 1,000, 1,500 feet, I don't know. But they were dropping 'em and I would hear them flop. And I knew this was not an exercise. And when I alerted the CP[*command post*] the second time, I had already started to smell the smoke and knew there was damage going on in the harbor.

JM: Sort of to recap -- the first time you reported it, he didn't really believe you and sent you . . .

EG: That's right.

JM: . . . to double check.

EG: That's right.

JM: You said you'd been drilling a lot. Had they trained you in aircraft recognition and . . .

EG: Aircraft recognition was a big thing that we had to do for all the time we was there, and they had slides and good equipment for that time. And we, of course, had to be capable of identifying Japanese -- well, they didn't --- we did more on the -- first of all, we identified our own aircraft. And then, we started to identify foreign aircraft, but we had as much time looking at French aircraft and British aircraft, and they never specialized in Japanese, any more than they did on Russian. It was so remote and somebody told me that it was against the Geneva Convention to ever specifically in time of peace pick out who your potential enemy may be.

JM: At about what point did you realize whose planes they were and did you even recognize the types of planes that were flying.

EG: Yes I did.

JM: Uh-huh.

EG: I did and then when I saw the meatball -- now we never had any identification of what kind of national markings any planes except our own had. But the meatball rang a bell in my mind that it was Japanese. And when they unloaded and after our battery got assembled and we started to shoot, we started to get strafed when the Zeroes, it seems to me, then they were down at real low level.

JM: But had they paid any attention to your area before you opened fire?

EG: I wouldn't --- like, I don't really know what caused them to do it.

JM: We might have a . . .

EG: Yeah, yeah, that would, but we also were equipped with fifty caliber anti-aircraft machine gun, and one of our fellows got hit on the beach, at shooting at a Jap plane. And he got hit in the stomach, they told me. And they say he lived, but I never saw him after that.

JM: So you had prepared defenses down at the beach with the anti-aircraft guns? Were they . . .

EG: Yeah, yeah. There was two or three of 'em got down there in a hurry with the anti-aircraft.

JM: How fast would you say that the battery came together and started to fire?

EG: I would say within five minutes of the alert. We weren't in the greatest shape because it was Sunday morning, but we got down there and cut our shells. We always had to cut that anti-aircraft shell for altitude and distance. And whether it was accurate or not. But the big thing too was that long altitude determiner. When you started to get shells fall into your battery and there was a lot of stuff that came in, those fellows had a tough time concentrating on the elevation of the planes, and they changed elevation pretty quickly too.

JM: Did the real planes behave like the targets you'd been shooting at?

EG: No, not really. And we liked the target that was up 1,500 to 2,000 feet, and ran along on a level deal without doing too much maneuvering, because when you set your height, and you've read off your tables to set your fuses by you shooting ahead of that plane quite a distance, and then you were exploding this shell in an area where the plane could be crippled by it. And I don't honestly believe that our shells did any of that damage.

JM: You don't think you got . . .

EG: No, I don't think so.

JM: What exactly was your position on the guns?

EG: I was on the azimuth wheel, which did the 360 degrees circle. And then there was a fellow on elevation.

JM: When you said things were landing around you, were you talking about being strafed by the planes? And do you think any --- get any fire coming from anti-aircraft shot by the Navy over Pearl Harbor landing . . .

EG: Oh, I think the Navy was really shooting pretty hard and I don't know what, I think one corporal, who was the gun corporal, he was real close to me when a shell come right down through his helmet and went right down through his head and come out under his chin. And they said he lived too, but I never saw him after that. But he was one of the cadre that was put in there and he was a great guy. So . . .

JM: What else is going through your head at this point?

EG: Well, I'm scared. I'll tell you that. And plus the fact that at this time, the planes that were strafing and the people in the battery were very upset and scared. Some of our fellows didn't know really what to do. And I wasn't quite that bad, but the thing it taught me, it bred in me is we're not out here for a year like we're originally supposed to be. We're in a war now.

JM: Can you describe -- you said some of the guys were kind of upset. Some --- for someone who's never been in a war, I can't imagine what it's like. What did these guys do? How did they react the first time they were under fire?

EG: Well, the guy that was the bravest in peace time, was the worst yellow belly I ever saw. One shrapnel, or whatever it was, came in. He got into a hole outside the gun and that's all -- he would never come out of the hole. That's where he stayed.

But most of them really did their jobs, I would say. Yeah. Of course, the nice part about it was I had already -- I guess I must have had a feeling. I had already signed up for OCS, 'cause somehow I figured we were going to be there longer than a year.

And come January, about the tenth, why, they called me and says, "You're going back to the anti-aircraft artillery OCS [*Officers Candidate*]School."

Hurray! (Laughs)

JM: Did you notice during the course of the attack what people called the first and second waves, did you notice a lull or difference in aircraft attack patterns?

EG: Not honestly, no.

JM: Did you notice when it tapered off and everything started to quiet down?

EG: Well, it was pounding around for an hour or an hour and a half. And I knew there was fire somewhere from the smell, and . . .

JM: You couldn't see what was going on?

EG: Couldn't see a thing, except I did know that when the ships came into the harbor, they lined themselves up battleships, cruisers, submarines, right real close to each other.

JM: When you were at your anti-aircraft guns, could you see the harbor entrance at all . . .

EG: No.

JM: . . . or the ships as they left?

EG: No, uh-uh. Uh-uh.

JM: What did they have you do after the attack had come to a full halt? Did they have you take up positions on the beach? Did you stay by your guns then, or what?

EG: Well, we set up for a perimetral defense, to defend their guns. That was our main mission then. And the word was that the Japs were coming and we set up perimetral defense in about, well, after dark. We started to hear shooting and our shooting, and somebody else's shooting, we thought the Japs were there. And the forty, the fifty caliber machine guns that we were using, we weren't using for anti-aircraft, we were using against what we thought were the Japanese. And here it was, one of the divisions had our area as their war time perimetral defense. And they came in, and that got pretty hot for about twenty minutes before it got stopped.

JM: So there was another Army unit coming in?

EG: Yeah.

JM: Trying to set up a defensive area . . .

EG: Yeah.

JM: . . . when you were already there.

EG: Right. I'm sure they were. They were Schofield people that -- or infantry people that had the responsibility of defending that south shore.

JM: Describe what you mean by it got pretty hot there for a while?

EG: Well, you know, we had a thirty caliber machine gun. We had rifles. We had this fifty caliber anti-aircraft, and when the first group came in, they were firing machine guns right off.

JM: You got a power fight with the U.S. Army?

EG: Yeah. We didn't know it was the U.S. Army. We thought it was the Japanese.

JM: Did anybody get hit or hurt?

EG: Not to my knowledge. And it lasted maybe fifteen minutes, and then I don't know who stopped it. Unless somebody saw on an anti-aircraft, a fifty caliber, every fifth bullet was a tracer. And so somebody, apparently from the Army infantry, recognized it, that wasn't Japanese.

JM: So you thought you were really going to be in hand-to-hand combat.

EG: Oh yeah, we were ready.

JM: What happened?

EG: Well, we were glad when it didn't happen. I tell you, we were glad, 'cause we were scared.

JM: Do you remember when the guns around the harbor opened up, in the middle of -- late that night, on incoming enemy aircraft?

EG: There weren't any that I knew of. It was quiet at night. After that thing that we had in our area, I didn't hear anything more. Or the rest of that time.

JM: And that whole day and all the events that surrounded it, what sticks out really in your moment, on that day? What kind of events or emotions were the most powerful, after fifty years?

EG: Well, I couldn't figure why we were on alert and it seemed to me nobody else was. But this lieutenant, he apparently maybe got the word, and he was in Honolulu. And we didn't begrudge him that because he was a great officer. And coming through Hickam, he got a direct hit on his jeep and today was the first I ever had it confirmed -- it was all rumors for fifty years -- that all was left of him was his watch. And he is out on the memorial at Pearl. I saw it, I saw his name there today.

JM: He was your Lieutenant?

EG: Yeah. He was a commanding officer, I think, of the battery. Yeah.

JM: What's it like coming back after fifty years and seeing the place again?

EG: Well, I love it. I love the climate, I love the islands. But our old battery deal, I tried to reach it, and it's not only accessible, it's Navy housing area now, which is fine. But hit --- when I came back, I was on detach service to anti-aircraft school, and I came back, was immediately reassigned to the Hawaiian command, and came back as an officer, and stayed at Fort Shafter

for about two years. I ended up with the intelligence battery of the 53rd Brigade there for about a year and a half. One fellow, he's the only guy I've met from any of these people. And I met him this week and it was a real pleasure to see him. But none of the people in the battery G, I thought I'd be able to find someone. No way.

JM: How did you feel about the Japanese that day?

EG: Not good.

JM: Yeah.

EG: Not good. I've bought everything dirty that anyone's said about 'em. I've believed. (Chuckles)

JM: But what about today? How do you feel about Japan, today's Japan?

EG: I have no problem with it, basically. You know, I just don't have any problem.

JM: And even after the memorial, after the . . .

EG: Today, today. That's the first. In '88, from when I was out, we did a big trip from, a commercial trip out and they rolled in through the entrance and up around and I didn't realize how big a memorial they had there. Of course, we didn't get on the memorial at all. Today I was on the memorial and I was impressed.

JM: Does it --- and I'll put this one. How does it feel to see people, I mean 4,000, 5,000 a day coming to the *ARIZONA* Memorial to learn about the attack on Pearl Harbor and knowing you were there at a critical moment in history?

EG: Yeah, but I can't believe it. (Chuckles) I really can't believe it. Of course, for almost fifty years, well, forty years, I took it out of my mind. And basically one of the reasons I've lost contact so much is that I didn't make any attempt to stay in contact. So it's my fault. It's not anybody else's.

JM: Put it out of your mind because of what had happened that day, or . . .

EG: Nah, not really. I was not a big G.I. I loved freedom and I was ready to leave, and I didn't get out 'til the end of '45, so I had enough things on my arms, six of 'em, and enough points to get out right before Iwo Jima, and I was glad to go. Yup. And it was a --- I got to Tarawa, with the anti-aircraft and we were there for about a year, or year and a half. It seems to me it was forever. I didn't know when they were going to get us off of there because the Marines took that at about 2,300 men casualty in about three days of fighting. And they got torn to pieces. And the only souvenir I got from that was a booklet that I picked out of one of the main gun bunkers, and I thought this must be telling me the azimuth and the gun strategy. And I left it in my locker at home for forty years. I took it over to the War College in Carlisle last July, and they sent it off to Washington, and it came back, yup, this is a 1941 paymaster's schedule for the Japanese on Tarawa. It was a paymaster's schedule! Real neat, but I couldn't read it.

JM: I'm glad you made it back here today.

EG: I am too, I am too. It's real fun and we're with a real nice group..

JM: Thank you very much, Mr. Gault.

EG: Thank you.

JM: All right.

END OF INTERVIEW